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Appreciation

Dulles Days

Mrs. Bancroft, a novelist and journalist, lived in Switzerland during World War II with her banker-husband. Allen Dulles wrote in her copy of his "Germany's Underground" that her "discreet help started this story into motion." It is the first account of the Office of Strategic Service's relationships with Germans opposed to Hitler, including those who plotted against the dictator's life. Mrs. Bancroft played a significant role in these events.

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By Mary Bancroft

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In late 1943, a friend from the American Embassy in Bern phoned to ask if I could join him that afternoon in the Hotel Bauer-au-lac to meet his new "assistant." He had just crossed the frontier 20 minutes ahead of the Germans, as they sealed off Switzerland completely from the outside world.

I had been doing some work for the Office of War Information and hoped the meeting would mean more journalistic activity.

At the hotel my friend was chatting with a pipe-smoking, ruddy-faced man in a gray tweed suit. "I'd like you to meet Allen Dulles, Mary," said my friend.

And at that instant I knew that if my friend thought of this man as his "assistant," he would shortly have a big surprise. Allen Dulles, with his piercing blue eyes and his deceptively open and cheery manner, didn't strike me as anybody's assistant, at least not for long.

On that afternoon I heard the famous Dulles laugh for the first time, the laugh that was to become so familiar to those of us working with him during the darkest days of World War II.

Allen Dulles had several laughs. There was the short, quick one with a peculiarly hollow sound which was such an effective weapon in the service of his almost legendary discretion.

And a genuine, warm, hearty laugh I heard that afternoon when he caught sight of a sign in three languages posted by a hotel window looking out on the canal. The sign was in German, French and English.

The first two versions were impeccable, but the English one read "The seagulls making to much noie [sic], please do not feed them."

Allen Dulles liked that sign so much that the phrase was to become a part of the special codes we used to communicate openly over the wartime telephones on which an outsider was always listening.

The listeners were reputed to have difficulty staying awake because the staffs of the various embassies talked so much romantic nonsense, so much pure unadulterated drivel. But, of course, all the drivel had vital information buried within.

My husband, a Swiss who regarded most Americans either children or, at best, "innocents," never took such a view of Allen Dulles. That evening he said, "Very clever of you Americans to have accredited Dulles as you have. It makes things much easier for everyone." Pausing to regard me speculatively, he added, "I suppose you'll be working with him. But before you begin, I think you should realize that everyone in Switzerland knows that he is the head of your intelligence service here, even if you Americans don't!"

I have to admit that I felt a tiny thrill of excitement. As a child I had longed to become a trained nurse, a policeman or a spy, preferably all three, but that tweedy, pipe-smoking gentleman was a very far cry from the sinister types in raincoats I always imagined spies to be.

Allen Dulles has written about many of the events of those Swiss OSS World War II years—the officers' attempt on Hitler's life on July 20, 1944, and the negotiations for the surrender of northern Italy.

In the latter episode one of the Allied generals forgot the cover name he had used to enter Switzerland and Allen had to appeal to the Swiss foreign minister to let him out.

"I am quite willing to let him out, Mr. Dulles," the foreign minister said, "if you'll only tell me how he got in!"

Allen Dulles never stopped working, day or night. If one of his submarines (agents) was missing in enemy territory, his concern was most personal.

"All you actually need in this life is a little bit of courage," he once observed after a particularly complicated and potentially dangerous situation had been successfully resolved. He, himself, had a vast amount.

It is impossible to capture in a few paragraphs so soon after his death the magnitude of what he did in Switzerland during World War II.

It was pure chance that the Germans closed the Swiss frontier when they did and made it impossible for the regular OSS to follow him in. As a result he was forced to improvise.

It was a brilliant improvisation that was a privilege to watch.

At the 1960 Inauguration of President John F. Kennedy, since I too was Boston Irish, Allen asked me to watch the ceremony with them. Later we dropped him off at the White House and he said, "You know, don't you, that this is the eighth President for whom I've worked?"

While I knew what Allen did in the days after I was with him in Switzerland, that for me was always the unforgettable period.

Perhaps that is why, when the sad news of his death came over my radio, and my thoughts turned back a quarter-century, I was neither startled nor surprised to have the news followed by that popular song, now so high on the charts, "Those were the days, my friend, We thought they'd never end . . ."

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